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SUBJECT: COUNTERING WAHABI INFLUENCE IN ETHIOPIA THROUGH
CULTURAL PROGRAMMING

REF: 08 ADDIS ABABA 3230

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

THIRD OF THREE CABLES ON COUNTERING WAHABI INFLUENCE IN
ETHIOPIA

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Every culture that has adopted Islam has its own unique traditions and practices for expressing their Faith. This is manifested through shrines, literature, faith rituals, and objects that include manuscripts, art, and even clothing and other accoutrements. In countries with mixed faith traditions, tolerance and mutual respect are usually enshrined in theological teachings, but foreign missionaries and other external influences can undermine that balance and force change on the teachings. This &cultural imperialism⁸ can be countered through cultural programming that focuses on places, objects, and traditions as they relate to indigenous Muslim communities. Similarly, it is important to help local Muslim leaders resist these external forces intellectually by providing materials written by Muslim authors that support a more orthodox interpretation of Islam in local languages. Doing so supports U.S. foreign policy objectives and may contribute to countering Islamic extremists. END SUMMARY.

THREE-PRONGED STRATEGY: PLACES, OBJECTS, AND TRADITIONS

¶2. (C) By recognizing Wahabism as &cultural imperialism,⁸ a strategy for countering this influence presents itself. This strategy is three-pronged, centered on places, objects, and traditions. In any situation where an indigenous culture is being threatened by external cultural influences, cultural pride (or lack thereof) can be the determining factor as to whether the indigenous culture loses the battle. In the case of Ethiopian Islam, there is great cultural pride in Ethiopia's Islamic history and Muslim faith and practices, so it is vital to reinforce that pride and assist the local culture in asserting itself in the face of these foreign influences.

¶3. (C) Here in Ethiopia, this strategy of countering Wahabi influence through cultural programming has been done through the following grants and programs from FY-06 to the present:

PLACES:

- a) The Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) grant to restore the Sheikh Hussein Shrine in Bale;
- b) AFCP grant to restore the Teferi Mekonnen Palace in Harar (although the childhood home of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Palace now houses the City Museum, which is heavily focused on Muslim life in Harar);
- c) AFCP grant to restore the Muhammad Ali House in Addis Ababa, the home of a prominent Muslim merchant that reflects the heavy influence of Muslim merchants and trade with the Middle and Far East in the 19th century.

OBJECTS:

- d) Public Affairs Section (PAS) grant to establish an &Islamic Manuscript Preservation Center⁸ at the Teferi Mekonnen Palace in Harar;
- e) PAS grant to the Institute of Ethiopian studies (IES) to purchase several Ethiopian Orthodox icons and Islamic manuscripts that were in danger of leaving the country;
- f) PAS grant to the American Friends of the IES to pay for materials that will be used for the storage and preservation of Islamic manuscripts in Addis Ababa and for teaching Ethiopian experts how to process them;
- g) PAS grant to a U.S. Fulbright Scholar to do an assessment of over 1,000 Islamic manuscripts in Harar and develop a work plan for establishing the Center there (see &a8 above).

TRADITIONS:

- h) PAS grant to send a group of three Harari experts to the Foxfire Fund in Mountain View, Georgia, to learn about

ADDIS ABAB 00001675 002 OF 004

developing an oral history program for high school students;

- i) Finally, providing two books written by a Muslim-American scholar (&The Place of Tolerance in Islam⁸ and &The Great Theft,⁸ both by Khaled Abou el-Fadl) in the local languages of Amharic, Oromifa, and Somali.

RESTORING) AND RESPECTING) THE PLACES

¶4. (U) The restoration of the Sheikh Hussein Shrine through the AFCP directly impacts the tens of thousands of pilgrims who visit the shrine every year. Shrine caretakers readily publicize the role of the U.S. in rescuing the shrine and for facilitating the visits of pilgrims who venerate the tomb of Sheikh Hussein every day. Post is currently planning a small booklet that will be produced, printed, and distributed at the shrine that will give the shrine's history, along with publicizing the role of the U.S. in preserving it. Besides American concern for the historical and cultural value of the shrine, pilgrims also perceive that the United States respects Sheikh Hussein, something the Wahabis absolutely do not.

¶5. (U) The FY-09 AFCP grant to preserve the Teferi Mekonnen Palace was also very well received by the people of Harar. In an announcement ceremony on June 25 in Harar, the PAO highlighted President Obama's Cairo speech and noted that this grant and a second grant for preserving Islamic manuscripts is putting the President's words into action right in their city. By showing that the U.S. cares about Harar's Muslim heritage and is taking concrete action to preserve and protect it, these cultural programs are clearly resonating with the people of Harar and with the larger Ethiopian Muslim community, which sees Harar as its spiritual center.

¶6. (U) The Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (IASC) invited the PAO to visit the Jama Negus Mosque in Dessie in the hope that the Embassy might do a large grant to preserve that complex. That visit was detailed in Part I of this cable series. The IASC strongly hopes (as expressed by both the current

leadership and the last leadership) that the Embassy will submit an AFCP proposal in FY-10 for this project and explained why doing so will help them to counter Wahabi influence.

JAMA NEGUS AS A COUNTERPOINT TO WAHABI INFLUENCE

¶ 17. (C) This particular site is illustrative of how cultural programming can counter Wahabi influence. As the first place in Ethiopia where the Birthday of the Prophet was celebrated, the site today is a center of moderate, Sufi, Ethiopian Muslim life. As local Muslim clerics and intellectuals there and in other places in Ethiopia have repeatedly told the PAO and other interlocutors, &Wahabis hate Moulids; they think they are unislamic.⁸ Moulids are, however, critical to the spiritual life of Sufi communities around the world and are a vital aspect of indigenous Muslim cultural expression in all those places where Sufis are numerous. Likewise, tombs of &Muslim saints⁸ and pilgrimages to such shrines are also vital to both Sufi and Shi'a communities and Wahabis have often attacked and destroyed these shrines as being &unislamic.⁸ In the same vein, the practice of &zikrs,⁸ the rhythmic prayers chanted by groups of devotees in communal worship, are also condemned as &unislamic,⁸ even though these are also sincere expressions of the local culture's practice of Islam. As reported in reftel, Wahabis destroyed more than thirty such shrines in the Bale region before finally stopping their campaign in the face of virulent public opposition. Foreign Wahabi missionaries in the Wello zone thus doubly criticize the Jama Negus Mosque in Dessie as both a pilgrimage destination and the center of Moulid celebrations in Ethiopia.

¶ 18. (C) Arab (e.g., Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Qatari) NGOs active in Ethiopia have refused to provide any assistance to supporters of the Jama Negus Mosque, in spite of requests from Muslim leaders in the region and the activity of those NGOs in supporting new mosque construction throughout the area.

ADDIS ABAB 00001675 003 OF 004

These NGOs are almost exclusively Wahabi in orientation. This repeats a pattern already demonstrated in the Bale and Harar regions where it was only U.S. support (through the AFCP and PAS grants) that helped Ethiopian Muslims to preserve their historic shrines and manuscripts.

PRESERVING THE OBJECTS) ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPTS

¶ 19. (U) Manuscripts are an especially important part of this strategy. Ethiopian Muslims in general, and Hararis in particular, are especially proud of the long history of Islamic learning and thought that existed in Harar over many centuries. Unique styles of calligraphy, manuscript illuminations, styles of bookbinding, and even unique contributions to Islamic thought are all characteristic of Islamic culture in Harar and the surrounding region.

¶ 10. (U) However, unlike Christian manuscripts, Muslim manuscripts are in great danger and their loss to Ethiopia removes them completely from their historical context. There are several reasons for this. First, Islamic manuscripts are almost exclusively written on paper as Harar was a great trade center in centuries past and paper could be easily purchased from India and the Orient. Christian manuscripts, on the other hand, are almost always written on skins, which are much more durable than paper and do not break down nearly as fast as paper does. Christian manuscripts are also written in Ge'ez or Amharic, so no matter where they end up in the world, it is obvious they were produced in Ethiopia. Muslim manuscripts, though, are almost exclusively written in Arabic, so once removed from Ethiopia, their provenance is almost always unknown and it is no longer clear that they

were produced in Ethiopia) especially when the author's name is recorded and it is an Arabic name, as most Muslim names in Ethiopia are.

¶11. (U) Where this becomes a real cultural issue is when Ethiopian Muslim writers with Arabic names write books on Islamic law, Muslim traditions, Sufi holy men and women, etc., and the books are removed from the country and collected/studied abroad. When this happens, it may not be at all clear that the author was an Ethiopian or that the book was produced as part of a Harari school of Islamic thought. As a result, Ethiopia's historical status in the larger Muslim world is reduced and knowledge of &African Islam⁸ is reduced.

¶12. (U) Post's strategy in this phase is first to assess the manuscript holdings at the Teferi Mekonnen Palace by sending Fulbright Scholar Sean Winslow to Harar for three weeks to assess those holdings, as well as to visit a few of the 200-plus shrines in Harar to get an idea of the holdings that may be extant under the control of the IASC in Harar. A &Manuscript Preservation Center⁸ will then be established in the second floor of the Teferi Mekonnen Palace (after the AFCP project is completed), with a PAS grant providing for supplies and equipment needed to restore and preserve the manuscripts currently held there.

¶13. (U) Several Ethiopian manuscript experts are also being trained in preservation techniques at the Institute for Ethiopian Studies, with PAS providing a small grant to purchase supplies and equipment for the training session. This will not only help to preserve the Islamic manuscripts in Addis Ababa, but it will also help to provide the critically-needed expertise in Ethiopia for preserving these manuscripts.

RECORDING THE TRADITIONS) ORAL HISTORY IN HARAR

¶14. (U) Pride in one's heritage is critical to resisting cultural imperialist influences. In Southern Appalachia, the Foxfire Fund teaches high school students how to gather and report oral history and that history is integrated into the high school curriculum so that children gain a greater appreciation for their heritage. Through a PAS grant, three Harari history specialists spent a week at the Foxfire Fund in Mountain View, Georgia, learning about these techniques and developing ideas for how they can promote the collecting,

ADDIS ABAB 00001675 004 OF 004

recording, and study of oral history traditions in Harar, including dance, music, and other artistic traditions.

¶15. (U) Post expects that this group will be submitting proposals for small grant support in the months ahead and will give them due consideration as part of its ongoing Faith Communities Outreach strategy.

CHALLENGING WAHABISM INTELLECTUALLY

¶16. (C) As part of a broad Faith Communities Outreach strategy, cultural programming can contribute significantly to the achievement of foreign policy objectives. In the case of Ethiopia, these include stability, co-existence of Muslim and Christian communities, rejection of Islamic extremists by the population, and a firm stance from Ethiopian Muslim leaders that rejects Salafist teachings and practices. While no one will argue that all Wahabis are Salafists, there is clearly a link between the growth in Salafism and the spread of Wahabism by foreign missionaries and Arab NGOs. Ethiopian Muslim traditions, as in most African countries where Islam has been a factor, are mainly derived from Sufi faith traditions. With an emphasis on tolerance and mutual respect

for &the People of the Book⁸ (Jews, Christians, and Muslims), a stress on internal) not external) Jihad, and customs and practices that often seem to mimic Christian practices, many Sufi traditions come under direct assault from Wahabi activists who see them as an impediment to the imposition of Wahabism in areas of strategic interest to them.

¶17. (C) Cultural programs that strengthen the indigenous Muslim community against foreign encroachment ultimately help to preserve the delicate balance between faith communities that has developed over the centuries, especially in Africa. Doing so also demonstrates to the rest of the world that a great religion such as Islam can come in many &flavors⁸ and that every culture can adapt itself to Islam while adapting Islam to itself without corrupting the essential core beliefs of the Faith. There is not one version of Islam that applies to all, but rather it is a faith rich in diversity and all forms of it should be respected) not just one.

¶18. (C) Any culture is usually proud of its contributions to the world's religious heritage and efforts to protect and preserve those contributions are widely appreciated within that culture. Such cultural programming does not have to be very expensive, especially when considered within the larger context of U.S. assistance, but it can have significant Public Diplomacy payoff for the United States and contribute measurably to foreign policy success. When well-considered and executed creatively, cultural programming can make a real difference in turning back Islamic extremism and turning public opinion against activists who seek to overturn the existing order and import a brand of Islam that breeds conflict through its corrosive teachings that run counter to more orthodox interpretations of the Koran.

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